

REPRESENTATION OF AFGHAN INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S AND *THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED* AND *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*: A CULTURAL STUDY

SADIA QAMAR¹ & RANA KASHIF SHAKEEL²

¹Lecturer, Department of English, G. C. University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

²Lecturer, Department of English, Punjab College of Science, Faisalabad, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Instead of employing traditional Post Colonial mode of representation, the present research aims at the textual analysis of an Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini's two novels — *And The Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* under the Cultural mode of representation. Delimited to Raymond Williams' concepts of cultural criticism i.e. 'documentary' and 'social', the analysis is comparative in nature that highlights the quality of representation of Afghan culture in the works under study. Social institution of *Marriage* documented by Hosseini is compared with the real Afghan culture derived from the historical background of Afghanistan. This will, hopefully, lead the critics towards a new mode of analysis.

KEYWORDS: Representation, Marriage, Culture, Matriarchal, Patriarchal, Patrilocal, Endogamous, Social Culture, Documentary Culture, Martial Forces

INTRODUCTION

Afghan culture with its institution of *marriage* seems to be very complex phenomenon having its deep roots in history. The aim of this research paper is to do a cultural study of Afghan social institution of *marriage* in Khaled Hosseini's *And The Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Khaled Hosseini's representation of Afghan socio-cultural institutions seems partly questionable and partly justified. He passes through an evolution of Afghan culture from *The Kite Runner* to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and then to *And The Mountains Echoed*.

It is well said that man is a representational animal. *Representation* is a very flexible notion that ranges from 'carving a stone to man', to 'representing a man's life' through literary arts, novel, drama etc. There is much postcolonial scholarship that describes the *politics of representation* and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is the most influential of all. Influenced by Foucault's concept of *power/knowledge*, *Orientalism* describes how the Western world especially Britain, France, and the United States through their "academic, literary, and philosophical endeavor" (p. 173) become able to present the "*Orient as Other*" (p. 173). The purpose of representation of *Orient*, is to exalt the *Occident*.

Raymond Williams (1994) gives three interpretations of culture—*ideal*, *Social*, and *Documentary*. *Documented culture* is the cultural representation of any society. This type of representation is in actual the *constructional representation* of any society, community or ethnic group. Frantz Fanon (1968) defines the role of postcolonial representation in terms of distorted, disfigured and destructive representation of the past of the oppressed people. Cultural representation of Afghanistan, Afghans' culture, and social institutions is the constructed one. The aim of this cultural

study of Afghan institution of marriage is also to expose the propagation of the Western angle of the Afghan society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research attempts to explore how Afghan marriage is represented in Khaled Hosseini's *Mountains and Suns*. This analysis of the novels also evaluates how Hosseini creates an impression that political turmoil result in *shaping* and *deshaping* the Afghan culture.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objectives of this study are to analyse the ambivalent and incognito representation of Afghan culture and society with reference to the institution of marriage. It explores the difference lying between the *documentary* and *social* modes of Afghan culture. The research also strives to analyze, to what extent the socio-culture life of Afghans was spoiled by the religious and martial agents. Furthermore, it presents an intellectual acceptance or denial of the representation of stereotypes of Afghanistan by incorporating texts and historical background of Afghanistan, Taliban and also the religio-cultural values of the natives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the present analysis, Williams' (1994) views on culture seem quite suitable as the starting point. Key terms representing his definitions of culture are 'Ideal', 'Documentary', and 'Social'. To analyse the issue of cultural representation, social definition has been employed. It, according to Williams is, "a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in the art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour" (p. 56). Better understanding of the texts under study also depends on certain key terms of other political and social theories like Postcolonialism, Orientalism, Marxism and Feminism. Nature of this research is comparative where the comparison is between the 'documentary' culture that in other words is 'intellectual and imaginative', and the 'social' culture that is 'real'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although the novels of Hosseini remained the bestseller books in their respective eras, available literature includes only a few newspaper reviews, research papers and online study guides. Collected data has been employed to have a comparative study of 'documentary' and 'social' modes of representation of the Afghan institution of marriage. However whatever is being presented is no less than a starting point on Afghan-American literature generally and on Hosseini's work particularly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rekha Chitra V.K. (2013) presents an *Orientalist* reading of Hosseini's *Kite*. According to her, "The novel not only launched Hosseini into the limelight as an Afghan-American writer but also bridged the gap between Western literary audience and the culture of the Middle East" (p. 1). Malik Muhammad Asghar, Ghulam Murtaza & Kazam Shah (2014) endorse the same as:

It is notable that the main readers of *Kite* are not the Afghans. The novel clicks so powerfully with American readers. It pays attention to the 'hot topics' such as extremism, fundamentalism, Taliban, and women's rights in Afghanistan (p. 20).

Adding *Orientalism* (1978) by Said, Chitra (2013), and Malik, Murtaza & Shah (2014) describe how the West generates the stereotypes of the East. Said is of the view that the construction of the *Orient* by the West “[is] a projection of those aspects of the West, that the Westerns do not want to acknowledge in themselves” (Chitra, 2013, p. 2).

Kite and *Suns* have been described as the stories of ‘domestic and political violence’. It seems that *Suns* is almost the sequent of *Kite*. It cannot be read without having read the first one. Mariam, the representative of crushed women of Afghanistan, stimulates the reader. Even if the novel does not please us due to its cruel imagery, “it is an insight into female struggles within the context of war, and deserves to be read by both women and men” (p. 18). Selvi Bunce (2012) writes, “I would only recommend it if the person [is] looking for a good cry” (p. 833). Comparing *Kite* with *Suns* she writes, “When you have finished it, then recollect the relationship between the two brothers in *Kite* and two women in *Suns* and consider how Afghanistan’s conflicts and struggles create and steer the lives of her people” (2009, p. 13).

Dr. Swapna Gopinath (2013) presents the *Suns* as the history of a war trodden and torn land. He describes the situations of the novel and the progress of actions along with the changes in the changing structures of political and social institutions. He starts as: “Afghanistan has gone through several wars and internal strifes which has created a unique social milieu” (p. 1).

Marziel Gordan & Areej Saad Almutairi (2013) describe the novel as the text of post colonial resistance and feminist resistance. They focus on the levels of resistance present in the characters of women of the novel. They point out how the gender oppression designs the lifestyle of the women and their status in the culture. Resistance based on two levels, postcolonial and feminist, present the conflict between ‘identifying and identification’; and ‘self identity against the masculine standards’ respectively.

ANALYSIS

Linda Merrill, Donald Paxson & Thomas Tobey (2006), and Wali M. Rahimi (1991) write that Afghan family system is *endogamous, patriarchal, patrilineal* and *patrilocal*. Raymond Scupin & Christopher R. Decorse (2012) differentiate between endogamy and exogamy as: “Two general patterns of marriage exist: endogamy which is marriage between the people of the same social group or category, and exogamy; marriage between people of different social groups or categories” (p. 308). We find endogamous marriage neither in *Suns* nor in *Mountains*. We know much about the marriage of Mariam with Rasheed, imposed on her by her step mothers, and the marriage of Rasheed with Laila where the prevailing circumstances force a teenage girl to marry a person many times older than she is. Laila’s life is spoiled by the armed men and the life of Mariam is first totally left to destroy by Jalil and afterwards by Rasheed. In *Mountains*, once again, we do not have endogamous marriage. Saboor’s marriage with Parwana, and Wahdati’s marriage with Nila, both are exogamous. Although in both novels the ‘marriage’ has been misrepresented, in the former one it becomes more painful for the characters as well as for the readers, but in the latter the case is not so painful, rather we appreciate even this misrepresentation, because it is not doubled with the physical punishment to the female characters.

Another aspect of Afghan institution of ‘marriage’ is the building of ‘Patriarchal family’, in which Muhammad Iqbal Chaudhry (2003) says, “The authority is vested in the husband or male head and his decisions in every matter related to family are final” (p. 342). Rahimi (1991) writes that Afghanistan is a patriarchal society where all decisions including the household, child education and residence are made by male folks. In *Suns*, two male characters, Jalil and Rasheed, are responsible for the whole plot. In the form of Jalil, we have been shown a weak agency of patriarchal strength. When

Jalil's wives decide the marriage of Mariam, he is represented as a silent spectator. He seems to be an impotent figure before the power of his three wives. But his silence and weakness gives birth to an uncivilized character's brutality towards his daughter Mariam. Jalil is a very wealthy person and in an *Afghan family* wealth or economic stability, says Rahimi (1991), is one of the things that make women subordinate to the male agency. But in the case of Jalil, it is misrepresented. Same is the case with the story of Nila and Mr. Wahdati where the latter has been presented in a pleasant way, a silent spectator. Here in these two situations the matriarchal domination is visible in all respects. The representation of Mariam and Laila is more hyperbolic than the representation of Wahdati and Jalil. The relationship between Saboor and Parwana is again based on patriarchal system because his family is dependent on him. The character of Baba Ayub also highlights the Patriarchal values of Afghan family but his character is represented with positive traits by the author. According to the narratives of *Suns* and *Mountains*, the newly established families are Patrilocal that is "a family system [in which] the young married couple moves into the husband's household (Chaudhry, 2003, p. 341). Nila of *Mountains*, and Mariam of *Suns* move to their husband's households. But Laila is not sent by her parents; rather she is forced to join Rasheed by the brutal activities of Mujahideens whose warhead kills her parents. This part of story fully highlights the destruction of social institutions by martial forces.

Merrill, Paxson & Tobey (2006) further describe, how the selection of mates contributes to the building of an Afghan family. While choosing a match, the Afghan parents consider many things. First of all they are desirous of *Group Solidarity* that is attached with endogamous marriages which are not seen in the both novels as we have already discussed. *Suns* and *Mountains* represent exogamous marriages that are not much common in Afghan culture. Other things contributing to the match making are, "sustaining social order" (p. 8) and "confirming social status" (p. 8). In *Suns* the marriage of Rasheed with Mariam does not approve the both parameters because for the sake of getting rid of Mariam, she is married to a *mocchi*, who has no strong economic status rather "He's a shoemaker' ... But not some kind of ordinary street – side *moochi*...he has his own shop, and he is one of the most sought after shoe maker in Kabul" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 51). In the case of Laila. We have been shown even more problematic scene where no parents, no match making and even no way to escape is given to Laila. The prevailing circumstances – involving her illegitimate pregnancy cause a lot to design her fate.

On the other hand, we have not been shown the scenes of matchmaking in the cases of Parwana and Saboor, and Wahdati and Nila. In the former condition, we find how a girl named Masooma sacrifices her wishes and says her sister, "[to] marry Saboor. Look after his children. Have [her] own" (Hosseini, 2013, 69). Here, the tradition of matchmaking is missing, but despite that the representation is pleasant and positive. At the same time, in Wahdati's case, we find him a financially stable person, as we have been given a brief sketch of his residence, possessions and social status. In this context, Nabi describes, "It was a beautiful, glorious place. The house sparkling white in those days, as if sheathed with diamonds ... the marble floor of the living room glistened ... the lapis chess set, the tall mahogany cabinet" (p. 75).

Another important thing about Afghan marriages, according to Merrill, Paxson & Tobey (2006) is the personality of a bride as an industrious and well temperamental maiden. In all the four cases including Mariam, Laila, Parwana and Nila, the writer does not present the parents of the husbands considering these characteristics. In the process of matchmaking "the happiness and welfare of the girl is not often neglected "(p. 8). Hosseini, in this respect, does not do justice. The ceremonies of Mariam's matchmaking and that of Laila in *Suns*, and also of Parwana and Nila in *Mountains* have not been presented in the novels, rather they have been represented as the members of incomplete families. *Women*

and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF, 2008) reports, "In a traditional community like Afghanistan the marriages are organized by the parents agreeing with each other to marry their children" (p. 15). Rahimi (1991) says that the parents and close relatives of bride and groom "meet to discuss the final terms of marriage" (p. 11). WCLRF (2008) also describes although the right of agreement has been given to fathers by the civil code of the country, they are subjected to double limitation. The father, first, has to take into account the future life and interests of his daughter. Secondly, the marriage of less than fifteen years old girl is prohibited. If we analyse the novel *Suns* in the light of first limitation, we find a complete absence of real parents when the marriage of Mariam is being decided. The real mother is no more in the world, and on the other hand the half father is also a silent spectator of his daughter's fate. This thing makes the story pathetic as well as stereotypical. He has no courage to look at Mariam. Mariam at this instant expects that Jalil will see at her but "he go [es] on chewing the corner of his lower lip and staring at the pitcher" (p. 51). In this scene, we find the death of patriarchy at the home of Jalil. It seems either he is ashamed of his crime and has not guts to speak before his wives, or he also wants to get rid of Mariam to save his honour among the people. Contrary to Mariam's state, Laila's parents have been blown up by the shells of the Mujahideen. She has no parental side to find a good spouse for her. No doubt the fathers have been given the authority to find a good husband for their daughters, they are also bound, according to the WCLRF (2008), to keep an eye on the interest of their daughters. But in *Suns* nobody even from female side takes notice of Mariam's interest, and Laila's case is also before us. If we go through *Mountains*, there has also not been presented the parental sides both with Parwana and Nila. One remarkable thing is that Parwana has been bestowed upon with a father like brother, and Nila is psychologically all alone before and after her marriage. We have a father only with Mariam who could have been presented as a careful and loving person looking forward to the good future of Mariam, but she is married to a *moochi* of Kabul. A high status person Jalil could have been depicted to marry his daughter to a person equal to his rank, as Rahimi (1991) prescribes, but it has been described contrary to the paradigm.

According to the minimum age of marriage declared by WCLRF's report and Rahimi (1991), Jalil is bound to not arrange his daughter's marriage before she reaches the age of 15. Her suitor, Rasheed at this time is of forty five. Violation, in this context has been elaborated through the ages of Laila and Rasheed that are 14 and 63 respectively. This incident is caused due to the absence of her family especially of her father. In *Mountains*, we have not been shown the pre-marriage time of both Parwana and Nila in the presence of their parental families. Even we do not find much age difference between the members of both couples. In this novel, although he skips all the traditions of a wedding ceremony, he does not present a violated age of marriage. Neither Saboor nor Wahdati are stereotyped as has been done in the case of Rasheed. So in the previous novel, the presence of father is most disfigured than the absence of father in *Mountains*.

The WCLRF (2008) and Rahimi (1991) note that the marriages between the young wives and old husbands cause complexities. The young brides remain dependant on their husbands and are kept illiterate. In both cases of Mariam and Laila, they present themselves reluctantly for sex. In chapter 11, Hosseini presents the scene of Rasheed's very first sexual intercourse with Mariam where the latter is shown as a reluctant young girl. It can be seen as:

[There is] a moment of hesitation, and then his hand [is] on her neck. . . the pain [is] sudden and astonishing. Her eyes [spring] open. They [lie] that way for a while, on their backs, not looking at each other (Hosseini, 2007, pp. 81-83).

Feeling Mariam's hesitation and pain, after doing sex, Rasheed says, "There is no shame in this Mariam ... It's what married people do. It's what the *Prophet* himself and his wives did. There is no shame" (p. 83). But on the other side,

we do not find such hesitation in Laila when she is being used by Rasheed. It is because, she knows the reality of her illegitimate pregnancy. In *Mountains*, we do not find such circumstances because there is not the representation of Afghan husbands and wives with a great age gap.

Physical, sexual and verbal modes of violence are, *The WCLRF* (2008) describes, the most prevalent forms of violence against the women, First, the report cites the definition of domestic violence, given by *The Commission of Women's Position under the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1993*, as:

Any gender based violent act that causes physical and /or psychological harms and damages, or harassing women through threatening them to do so or a result of forced or *discretionary deprivation*, women lose their freedom in society or family (p. 26).

In *Suns*, Nana is seen suffering from *discretionary deprivation* at the hands of Jalil. She loses her freedom in society and family, and is pinched psychologically at every moment. Though Jalil is not doing any physical and verbal assault on her, whatever he does, has deeper scares on her soul. Nana tells Mariam that Jalil had no *dil* to stand before his folks for the sake of Nana's respect. Instead of saving her honour, Jalil expelled her out of his house and forced her to live alone in the *kolba*. Her psychological pain can also be viewed through her words when she abuses Mariam by saying '*harami*' again and again. After this bitter experience, Nana teaches to Mariam as: "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 7). In this statement the word 'north' is very remarkable. Symbolically the word *north* indicates towards the regions where the Hazaras live.

Physical violence; according to the report includes "slapping pinching, biting, kicking, fisting, burning pouring hot water over the body, detainment, beating with a stone or a stick" (2008, p. 26). Much has been discussed in this regard in the previous discussion. In chapter 33 of *Suns* we see the violent Rasheed with a brown leather belt in his hand, while "Mariam [slides] out of her bed and [begins] backpedaling. Her arms instinctively crossed over her chest, where he often [strikes] her first" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 255). This fear, emerging out of the disposition of Rasheed, has been the cause of permanent psychological torture for Mariam for many years. We also find the brutality of Rasheed with Laila. Hosseini depicts the scene as: "And then he [is] on Laila, pummeling her chest, her head, her belly with fists, tearing at her hair, throwing her to the wall... [Rasheed] push[es] Laila to the ground, and begin[s] kicking her" (p. 326). Except it, the both women have to face double brutality – at the hands of Rasheed and the Taliban. Secondly, the young girls have to face sexual violence in which the dominant men are seen "trying to establish sexual relationship by force, damaging sexual organs, and boycotting and cutting sexual relations" (2008, p. 26). After getting married to Laila, Rasheed has not been shown doing sex with Mariam. He boycotts sexual relationship with Mariam on two basis – first she passes through a series of miscarriages, and secondly, Laila conceives a child. The establishment of by force sex relationship has been well criticized in the former discussion.

Verbal violence consists humiliation, isolation and insult of victimized person before his/her family and relatives. The defects of the women, according to *The WCLRF* (2008) are often mentioned and "these are sometimes accompanied by a series of threats such as murder, divorce, and threatening them for re-marriage" (p. 27). Isolation is also a sort of violence against women. Hosseini writes that after the incident in the bathhouse, Rasheed has got changed. It is shown that:

Most nights when he come[s] home, he hardly talk[s] anymore. He eat[s], smok[es], go[es] to bed, sometimes

come[s] back in the middle of the night for a brief and, of late, quite rough session of coupling (Hosseini, 2007, p. 100).

He still goes with Mariam for outing but he walks quickly without speaking with her, and “he [isn’t] so ready with a laugh on these outings anymore” (p. 100). In the response of Mariam’s question, “Are you angry with me?” (p. 100), he often sighs and does unbearable actions that disturb Mariam psychologically. Moreover, verbal violence is seen when he finds fault with her cooking and “complain[s] about clutter around the yard or point[s] out even minor uncleanliness in the house” (p. 100). In this respect the scene of stone chewing is the combination of both verbal and physical violence.

David B. Edwards (2002) describes the relationship between the Afghan institution of *family* and that of *marriage* in terms of child birth. It is, on one side, the symbol of pride and on the other side, it highlights the male potency, describes Rahimi (1991). This thing brings to us the theme of multiplication of the family. Child birth, here is not merely child birth, but birth of a male child is more appreciable. This can be seen in the case of Rasheed who prefers Zalmai to Aziza. Even Aziza’s birth becomes a constant torture for Rasheed. He always condemns the activities of Aziza. Once Mariam says, “Look! She’s reaching for the rattle. How clever she is” (Hosseini, 2007, p. 253). In response of this, he says, “I’ll call the newspaper” (p. 253).

His high hopes about a male child betray him and he becomes more violent against Mariam and Laila. In the beginning of chapter 13, we find a brief snapshot of Rasheed’s hopes. He discusses the name of the expected baby boy and suggests him to be called as Zalmai. Ironically, this name goes to the illegitimate son of Tariq and Laila. Same expectations, Rasheed keeps with Laila when she gets pregnant. In chapter 32, when Laila goes with Rasheed to his shoe maker’s shop, “He feel[s] her belly, not through the shirt but under it … swelling so quickly, Rasheed say[s], ‘It’s going to be a big boy. My son will be a *Pahlwan*!’” (p. 247). Birth of a male child is no less than a blessing for the Afghan families, as they make the ancestors immortal. Multiplication of family and its hopes have been described in *Mountains*, when Baba Ayub longs for sons and their generations. Saboor has also been portrayed as a successful father because he has children from both of his wives. In the cases of Rasheed, Whadati, Baba, and Amir, we have not been shown extended families. This lack of extension creates complexities in the personalities of Mariam, and Laila.

CONCLUSION

Afghan culture along with its all institutions is very complex to understand. Although the available data is quite random but it has been tried to present the real picture of Afghan institution of marriage. In his presentation, Hosseini seems ambivalent and reluctant. His *Suns* describes the story in a subjective manner that looks adding strength to Western discourse about *Oriental* stereotypes, rituals and practices. On the other side, *Mountains* does the same but it also demystifies and breaks the stereotypes built by the West. In *Suns*, Mariam and Laila—both are the victims of patriarchy at domestic and social levels. Martial forces, Mujahideens and Talibans, deshape the domestic and cultural life of the masses. These all things might have happened to the masses of Afghanistan, Hosseini has exaggerated the details to a very great extent in favour of the Western world. His misrepresentation is also not always unpleasant. In *Mountains* his misrepresentation of the institution of marriage seems more soothing, consoling and pleasant than the representation in *Suns*.

REFERENCES

1. Bunce, S. (2012). A thousand splendid suns by Khaled Hosseini. *Language in India*, 12(2), 829-833.
2. Chaudhry, I. (2003). *A textbook of sociology: Theory, research & problems*. Lahore: Aziz.
3. Chitra, V. K. (2013). Reinforcing the stereotypic binaries: Orientalist reading of the kite runner of Khaled Hosseini's. *The criterion: An international journal in English*, 4(3), 1-7.
4. Edwards, D. B. (2002). *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan jihad*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
5. Fanon, F. (1968). National culture. In Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (Eds.), *The postcolonial studies reader* (pp. 153-163). London: Routledge.
6. Gopinath, S. (2013). Tracing the history of war-trodden land: A study of Khaled Hosseini's *A thousand splendid suns*. *IRWLE*, 9(1), 1-7.
7. Gordan, M., & Almutairi, A. S. (2013). Resithousand splendid *A thousand splendid suns*stance, a facet of post-colonialism in women characters of Khaled Hosseini's a. *International journal of applied linguistics and English literature*, 2(3), 240-247.
8. Hosseini, K. (2013). *And the mountains echoed*. London: Bloomsbury.
9. Hosseini, K. (2007). *A thousand splendid suns*. New York: Riverhead Books.
10. Malik, M. S., Murtaza, G., & Shah, K. (2014). Representation of power relationship in *The kite runner*. *JS-China foreign language*, 12(1), 17-26.
11. Merrill, L., Paxon, D., & Tobey, T. (2006). *An introduction to Afghan culture*. Retrieved from Child welfare training institute, University of Southern Maine website: http://afghanag.ucdavis.edu/country-info/culture-and-working-locally/Man_Afghan_Culture_CWTI.pdf
12. Rahimi, W. M. (1991). *Status of women: Afghanistan*. Bangkok: Unesco Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.
13. Rehman, S., & Younas, G. (2002). *Sociology: The basic concepts*. Lahore: Majeed Sons.
14. Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
15. Scupin, R., & Decorse, C. R. (2012). *Anthropology: A global perspective*. London: Pearson.
16. Williams, R. (1994). The analysis of culture. In Storey, J (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (pp. 56-63). London: Harverster.
17. *Women and children legal research foundation*. (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.wclrf.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Early-Marrige-with-cover.pdf>